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ABSTRACT

Education is undergoing a time of unprecedented change. The issue of outcome-based education and the implications for assessment are of particular importance today. Although teachers in their first years of schooling have traditionally recognized developmental learning in their programs, changes in curriculum and assessment practices must reflect this understanding and be examined in terms of their impact on student learning. This paper focuses on the effect of new, outcome-based Victorian curriculum documents on teaching and particularly on assessment practices. It also raises questions about what we teach and assess in classrooms and how this helps or hinders learning. The paper begins with a clarification of important terms, including assessment, evaluation, and outcomes (or the end-products used to assess educational quality). Next is a discussion of the conflicting purposes of assessment, which emphasizes the political nature of many current assessment approaches. The outcome-based assessment approach mandated by the Victorian government (exemplified in the Victorian Curriculum Standards Framework) is explored, including content and process, use of levels, practical implications, planning and assessing using outcomes, and the impact of these curriculum and assessment practices on teaching and learning. The paper concludes by noting that the ultimate goal of planning and assessment practices must be to improve student learning. Questions are raised about what is taught and assessed in classrooms and how this helps or hinders learning. Contains 28 references. (WJC)

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ASSESSMENT FOR STUDENT LEARNING

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Paper Presented at The Sixth Australia and New Zealand Conference on the First Years of Schooling in Hobart, January, 1996.

Abstract

Education is undergoing a time of unprecedented curriculum change. The issue of outcome based education and the implications for assessment are of current importance to all teachers across Australia and around the world.

This paper will reflect on recent educational changes such as the use of outcomes to measure success (National and state based curriculum documents), standardised testing and increased political pressure for accountability on education systems. This paper will focus on the effect of new, outcome based Victorian curriculum documents on teaching and particularly assessment practices.

Teachers in their first years of schooling have traditionally recognised developmental learning in their programs. Changes in curriculum and assessment practices should reflect this understanding and must be examined in terms of the impact on student learning. This paper raises questions about what we teach and assess in classrooms and how this helps or hinders learning.

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Introduction

Recent educational changes such as the introduction of the National Statements and Profiles, the Victorian Curriculum Standards Framework, increased use of standardised testing and political pressure for accountability have caused teachers to reflect on their assessment and teaching practices.

This paper is based on a belief that assessment is not an end in itself and can only be justified by its direct or indirect benefits to students learning. The basic aim of assessment to promote student learning is a view which has been supported by a number of writers, for example, Wilson and Fehring (1995), Clarke (1988). If one of the major purposes of assessment is to improve student learning then important questions must be asked about the effects of different assessment types on student learning behaviors. Satterly describes the effects on pupils as 'far more contentious [than on teachers]' (1989:6).

Clarifying the Terms

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1. Assessment and Evaluation

Assessment is an all embracing term. Assessment may occur in a range of the situations when some aspect of a students learning is judged or measured. The terms assessment and evaluation are used differently by different people and often interchangeably. Assessment is often used synonymously with tests and exams but neither are necessarily a part of the assessment process.

In defining the terms assessment and evaluation the Victorian Ministry of Education in 1988, distinguished between the two and noted the importance of the process of learning. The Ministry defined assessment as a 'process concerned with gathering information about students' competencies where the focus is not only what has been achieved by students but also how they have gone about learning.' (1988 : 96) Evaluation was defined as the process 'where judgments are made about the worth of educational programs.' (1988 : 96)

Lloyd-Jones, Bray, Johnson and Currie (Eds) (1986) try to distinguish between assessment and evaluation but conceptualise the relationship differently: 'Assessment is concerned with how well the pupil has done, evaluation with whether it was worth doing in the first place. Evaluation cannot take place without assessment; and assessment which is completely divorced from evaluation is a half-measure.' (1986: 1)

Similarly, Wilson (1993) explores the connection between these two processes: 'The term assessment is given to the process of collecting and analysing information about student performance....Evaluation depends on assessment because it makes use of this collected information to make informed decisions about future activities and programs.'(1993 : 110-111). Later, Wilson and Fehring (1995) use the term evaluation to denote the making of judgments about students' work and the effectiveness of teaching and learning methods, programs and resources.

The term assessment will be used throughout this paper to refer to the collection and judgement of information about students' learning.

2. Outcomes

In the past the word 'outcome' was used in education in a non-specific way to mean an end product. Outcomes could be demonstrated through products, words or actions. While educational outcomes can be internal, for example, thinking skills, they are not always clearly demonstrable, sequential or observable. This is why they are often neglected in outcome based education (OBE) programs.

An outcome describes a particular behavior students will demonstrate after specific learning experiences or sequences of experiences. The behavior may be related to a skill, knowledge or process. Outcomes are observable and assessable.

Interestingly in 1992, before the introduction of outcome based education in Victoria, Masters and Doig argued that a constructivist view of learning meant a new approach to assessment was necessary. They claimed that watching for carefully defined student behaviors had become redundant. They suggested that collecting observations to build up

a better picture of an individual learner's conceptions was the order of the day.

The Conflicting Purposes of Assessment

A selected international overview of assessment practices will serve to demonstrate that what we choose to assess demonstrates what we value. In Hong Kong, the extrinsic goals of assessment are for selection for further study and certification are of predominantly important. While we may baulk at this idea, Leung (1995) points out that education, and particularly assessment, are inevitably enmeshed and influenced by the community, the culture and value people attach to assessment. Issues of what to assess and the educational purposes of assessment are not as important in Hong Kong as the logistics of fairness and confidentiality. Assessment becomes '...a goal in itself rather than a means of achieving the goals of assessment.' Leung (1995: 4)

In England, media hype about falling educational standards has become a political minefield. In this case and in other countries, including Australia, governments have moved to exert greater control over education by introducing a national curriculum and standardised assessment programs. Accountability by testing teaching has caused mixed responses. Cohen raises important questions about their validity:

> The blatantly political agendas being imposed upon schools by governments in the USA, UK and Australia have already eroded soundly based educational criteria. The educational ideas of teachers and professional educators are being replaced by expedient and narrowly conceived tools developed hurriedly and imperfectly. Cohen (1992: 191)

One wonders about the results. What do they represent and at what cost? Joffe (1992) also questioned the motives of the UK government. "What is not clear is whether the administration's main interest is Britain's position in international rankings or a real desire to improve students' educational opportunities.' (1992 : 191)

Standardised testing of basic skills (generally in Maths and English) is growing throughout Australia as a result of increasing political pressure for accountability. These standardised tests sends messages to the community about what is valued and significant for children's learning.

To return to Victorian foreshore, we may question the intensions of the newly implemented standardised tests (LAP). If we are to believe the rhetoric we might be persuaded by the Victorian Board of Studies (1995 b) argument that the LAP tests 'provide additional information to parents'. Given international insights political accountability seems more likely.

In two reviews of the LAP tests (Wilson, 1995 and Hornsby and Wilson, 1995) the tests did not rate well in terms of matching the curriculum document outcomes, reliability, validity and authentic learning opportunities.

Outcome Based Education: Content and Process

The Victorian Government is the only Australian state to delete the process strands from the National Curriculum Statements. In doing so they have devalued communication, investigation and cooperation in classrooms. The process of learning is of central significance to learning experiences of children and must not be neglected in teaching and assessment practices.

Given that the VCSF and statewide assessment program (LAP) is mandatory, we need to save some energy to teach and assess in ways which demonstrate what we value. In this way we can better meet the needs of the particular children in our community.

Outcome Based Education: Levels

Unlike other states and territories, the Victorian Government decided to attach levels to outcomes signifying what is to be achieved by particular grades. This has been controversial and challenging for teachers who believe in developmental learning. The levels look neat but the Victorian Board of Studies (1995 c) has already alerted teachers to the dangers of using these for reporting purposes. Despite this reservation, the Directorate has issued a directive to Victorian schools to use a computerised assessment package (KIDMAP) for assessment and reporting purposes. The system is able to record achievements on outcomes but the connection to what students learn remains to be seen.

Joffe argues that 'The notion of levels is simplistic,' (1992 : 204). Much learning does not take place in a predictable, linear and sequential fashion. Students do not typically take the same path and end up in the same destination. The organisation of knowledge (not understanding) into levels helps create and reinforce this misnomer. The impact of imposing overly high or low expectations on students can be devastating. The possibility of this occurring with levels is more likely.

Consider the teaching and learning beliefs of early educators. Many believe that an environment which encourages exploration of interrelated knowledge, skills, processes and attitudes within an evolving, constructive environment is crucial. Children do not enter or progress through school with the same conceptions and misconceptions. The teaching and learning environment must encourage interaction, cooperation and build on what children know and believe. This in direct contrast to curriculum developers who see education as a set of progressive compartmentalised outcome statements which can be tested. This conflict between humane education and social control has been discussed in relation to English schooling by Rogers (1992), Noss et al (1990) and Ernest (1991). The obvious danger is that in practice teachers will attach levels to chronological age.

This raises more important questions, for example, how were decisions about levels made? How can difficulty in concepts in maths and English be compared to SOSE and The Arts at these levels? When progress is judged by numerical rankings and levels by politicians, parents and teachers it is of concern that this focus will overshadow the understandings that each level is meant to represent. Questions asked by Joffe (1992) about teaching soley for

the attainment of content of the English National Curriculum could also be asked of the Victorian system. Pressure to push children through the levels exists but what are the consequences?

Practical Implications

Teachers have expressed concern that because of time spent assessing, recording and cross checking there will be little time left for teaching and learning. As teachers become more familiar with the curriculum statements and outcomes, the time involved in assessing and recording should become less. But some practical questions must be asked:

- How does one decide when a level has been achieved?
- Is it sufficient for teachers to plan for such outcomes on a number of occasions rather that assessing them with every child?
- Do teachers have to witness each outcome, several times in different contexts to say that the concept is understood?
- How far apart do these examples have to be to be sure the knowledge/skill is retained?
- Given the large number of outcomes (300 maths outcomes at level 3), how can all outcomes across KLAs be monitored?

We may accept that professional judgement can be made about outcome achievement but for comparability purposes (standards and levels) this implies that all teachers have a shared understanding of what the outcomes mean and will be making the same decisions about 'achievement' matters in the same way.

Given that the National Curriculum Statements and the VCSF specify content and not how this is to be taught, teachers should draw upon their already existing practices. In the beginning years of schooling this might include: observations, discussion, anecdotal notes, self-assessment, the collection of art work and other work samples. Assessment strategies which involve students themselves have real potential to contribute to student learning.

While the challenges of OBE have been highlighted in this paper the following section reminds teachers that whilst outcomes may be used for planning there are further implications for assessment.

Planning and Assessing using Outcomes

We can make use of outcome based education documents to audit the balance of our curriculum, refine planning and for reporting purposes but should not lose sight of the way children learn. Planning must take into account individual and community needs.
Children achieve different outcomes from each other, those planned and those identified with particular grade level (VCSF).

National Statements, Profiles and Statewide Curriculum Documents may be used to assist observations or anecdotal notes and therefore may constitute part of the assessment

and reporting process. But because outcomes represent only a small proportion of our teaching we must select strategies to assess the full range of what is taught and learnt in schools. Assessment practices should take into account developmental learning theory, learning styles and where children are at.

It is not an expectation, or possible, for teachers to monitor every classroom activity. Not all activities will neccessarily result in an assessable outcome, the outcome planned for, the same outcome for each child or an outcome identified for the specified grade level (VCSF).

The Impact of Curriculum and Assessment Practices on Teaching and Learning

Initial reactions to the publication of the Victorian Curriculum Standards Framework were similar to the effect of the National Curriculum in England (See Joffe, 1992). Some teachers showed anxiety, resignation and relief. This mixed reaction can be traced to a number of factors. Some teachers have welcomed the structure while others have rejected it as being inappropriate to the ways children learn. Many teachers have complained that the implications of trying to teach to the curriculum means less energy is being directed towards creating a positive classroom environment.

Teacher morale has also been affected. The commitment of teachers to school based curriculum was underestimated by the Victorian government. Some teachers have been angered by the governments rapid move to introduce a statewide curriculum with token consultation. The notion of the curriculum being a straitjacket rather than a guideline for planning has taken hold and the statewide testing program has heightened fears.

The pressure of monitoring the outcomes, for example, there are hundreds of outcomes at any one level, has resulted in teachers spending hours trying to assess attainment. Hunting (1995) and Joffe (1992) remind us that teaching for understanding may be sacrificed.

Hunting (1995) claims outcome based education is a simple training model that won't work in classrooms. He reminds us that our understandings of how children learn does not match the production line formula. Further, he suggests, that higher order thinking is not demanded by outcome based education. The ultimate effect, if teachers choose to teach to the standardised curriculum, which historically and internationally they have, is that children's thinking skills will not be assessed or taught. Assessment of easily regurgitated facts and figures with less regard for understanding and a rich curriculum could quickly follow.

In the new Victorian 'Keys to Life' Program (Directorate of Education, 1995) it states that parents can expect reports will identify standards of achievement. The sample report given includes year and VCSF level, class spread, class and student achievement. The value of this information for student learning was questioned in previous Ministry documents. In 1984 a directive was given that assessment policies should not

emphasise comparison:

'Improvement in learning is not likely to be fostered by competitive assessment... for some students, these approaches can lead to a school filled with failure and low self esteem...it rarely helps students to develop a clear understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. This help they provide to teachers to plan activities which better meet student needs is often very limited.' (1984: 13-14).

Questions about how judgements about class average will be made are partly answered by the new Victorian Science exemplary assessment materials (Victorian Board of Studies, 1995 a) in which each task is linked directly to VCSF levels and outcomes and each student response is given a score. Has the question about whether these assessment materials are compatible with the philosophy of developmental and cooperative learning been forgotten? Shouldn't these assessment models indeed be exemplary? If not, at least they could be consistent with current learning theory and practice?

The Victorian Board of Studies (1995: d) claims that the LAP tests won't narrow the curriculum. This response ignores masses of overseas data (for example, Corbett and Wilson 1988). It has also ignores what has been happening in Victorian classrooms this year. Teachers have been preparing students for test taking and, predicably if the tests continue, teachers will spend more of their time preparing their students for tests next year. Teachers feel a responsibility to ensure that their students pass tests (Gipps and Stobart, 1993). The question is: Will student learning improve from taking the tests? What can be guaranteed is that students' test performances will improve.

Conclusion

In our quest to come to grips with the increasing and changing demands on teachers (the latest being accountability through OBE) we should not lose sight of our ultimate goal of our planning and assessment practices: that is to improve student learning.

We must question whether our assessment practices mirror our beliefs about the purpose of assessment. My assertion is that we should only assess what may be used to improve student learning. In instances where our beliefs are in conflict with what is mandated by our employing authorities we may have little power to change what is demanded. Nevertheless, we can still question the purpose and include assessment strategies which are consistent with our understandings about how students learn (Masters and Doig, 1992).

Rogers (1992) believes that we must be prepared to 'challenge our own assumptions and continually attempt to ensure that we are doing our best to serve the interests of our pupils.' (1992 : 241) If our evaluation of our

assessment practices do not stand up to our criteria about assessment for learning we can take action to ensure that our practices do reflect what we value.

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